

# **STOPPING AND STARTING: EXPERIENCES OF ADULTS RETURNING TO FORMAL LITERACY LEARNING<sup>1 2</sup>**

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## **Introduction and abstract**

The purpose of this paper is to describe an exploratory piece of research undertaken by a group of practitioners and others interested in research in adult literacy and basic education. The group forms part of a wider network established in March 2000 as the Canterbury Adult Basic Education Research Network (CABERN). CABERN is open to anyone with an interest in adult literacy (practitioners, researchers, volunteer tutors, providers, etc.), and its research activities seek to foster collaboration and opportunities for professional development. It holds regular meetings and has undertaken several projects (see for example Boyd et al., 2002; Boyd et al., 2000).

This research was based on in-depth interviews with a small sample of participants in literacy programmes offered by adult literacy centres and purchased by Skill New Zealand as part of its Training Opportunities Programme. Its aim was to investigate the factors which had (a) led those interviewed to stop their learning to read and write at school, and (b) contributed to their renewed attempt to learn to read and write as adults. Underlying the study was the hope that it would contribute some insights and understandings which would be useful to adult literacy and basic education practitioners in Aotearoa New Zealand.

The findings of the study highlight the fact that literacy learning cannot be understood without locating it in a wider context. The study identifies a number of contextual factors which had a powerful influence on the formal literacy learning of the people interviewed here. In addition, the study highlights a number of issues which can be addressed directly by practitioners.

## **Background**

Over the past three decades there has been a growing recognition of the fact that formal literacy problems are not limited to those areas of the world with high levels of poverty and limited

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opportunities for formal schooling. It has become increasingly evident that the extension of compulsory schooling in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries into the teenage years in many countries, including those wealthy or relatively wealthy countries which were members of the OECD, did not succeed in ensuring high levels of formal literacy for all. This recognition, which may be attributed in part to the work of a number of researchers and practitioners, has also given rise to further research, and this has been informed by a wide range of both functionalist and critical theories and philosophies.

Both internationally and locally, over the past three decades there has been a steady increase in research and publications. Much recent New Zealand research has been built around the findings of the OECD's first International Survey of Adult Literacy (OECD, 1997, 2000; Watson, 1999). This international survey, in which the New Zealand Ministry of Education took part, had a profound impact in documenting systematically for the first time the extent of literacy problems in a number of countries including New Zealand. Other New Zealand publications have looked at philosophical issues within a critical tradition (Benseman, 1998; Roberts, 1992, 1995), and examined literacy in the workplace (Moore & Benseman, 1996), as well as other national policy issues; (see for example Johnson, 2000; Sutton & Benseman, 1996). Several of these studies led up to the publication in May 2001 of the first national adult literacy and numeracy strategy document by government (Office of the Minister of Education, 2001).

In addition to this body of research, this study has been informed by a number of international studies which have drawn on ethnographic and qualitative research traditions (See for example Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Baynham, 1995; Crowther, Hamilton, & Tett, 2001; Fingeret & Drennon, 1997; Gowen, 1992; Hamilton, Barton, & Ivanic, 1994; Hunter, 2001; Luttrell, 1989; Prinsloo, Breier & Street, 1996; Prinsloo & Kell, 1997; Rogers, 2002; Sparks, 1998). In the first place, then, this study is a qualitative rather than quantitative one, and hence differs in important ways from those based on large-scale surveys. Thus, for example it does not assume that literacy comprises a universal and standardised set of skills the possession of which can be measured using a standardised tests. Secondly, it focuses on learners' perspectives and hence does not assume that there is only one form of literacy or that there is only one uniform way of acquiring formal literacy. Thirdly, it adopts a critical perspective which challenges implicitly or explicitly assumptions that people who cannot read or write are in some way necessarily 'incompetent', 'deficient' or 'dependent'.

As indicated above, we have drawn on both local and overseas research. From the latter for example, in addition to the work already cited, we have drawn on the work of Fingeret (1983), who conducted in-depth interviews with a number of participants in adult literacy programmes in the U.S.A. Her study was significant for a number of reasons:

- firstly it challenges the deficit perspective which views people who cannot read and write very well as somehow incompetent or unintelligent, and hence ‘unemployable’ or unable to function effectively in society;
- secondly, it attempts to break the hegemonic notion of dependency and isolation which pervades the image of most illiterate adults contained in much of the literature; and
- thirdly, through its social network approach it challenges the highly individualistic perspective on literacy which characterises much research literature.

Instead, Fingeret found that many of the adults in her study were members of a very rich and vibrant social network - most were not isolated and cut off from the social world around them - most were treated as equals within their networks; these networks and communities provided security and support for the people concerned; these networks and communities included at least one reader and generally more than one; adults who were unable to read and write very effectively made significant contributions to their networks which could be understood as part of an ongoing reciprocal exchange process; people who cannot read and write effectively work out ways to avoid having to call on ‘readers’ too frequently; and they work out strategies to cope with their particular limitations as they affect them in their everyday lives.

Moreover, she also showed that, while some people who cannot read and write effectively do see themselves as having little or nothing to contribute to their networks, and hence may be viewed as dependent, their lack of education and their inability to read and write is seldom the underlying cause of the dependency, though it may contribute to it.

In the New Zealand context this research tradition is represented by a few studies. One was undertaken by Benseman (1989). As part of a wider evaluation project Benseman undertook in-depth interviews with thirty-nine adult students who were participants in the Auckland Adult Literacy Scheme. One of the key aims of the study was ‘to gain further understanding of people with literacy/numeracy problems in New Zealand’ (p 19). Two thirds of the participants were men and one-third women; twenty-six were under thirty years of age, twelve were between 30 and 50, and one was over 50; thirty were Pakeha, six were Maori, one was Chinese, one Tongan, and one was unsure of her ethnic/cultural background. Most were from poor or relatively poor family backgrounds. Of the thirty-nine interviewees, two said they had enjoyed school, six others said that school was ‘adequate’ or OK’, while thirty-one interviewees expressed a strong dislike of school. All except one (whose literacy difficulties stemmed from concussion in a car accident) said that they had had literacy difficulties at school. A wide range of reasons were given for joining the scheme. The emphasis in a large number of cases was on achieving more in life. Getting a drivers’ licence or a better job were reasons given by several interviewees, while others had joined the scheme to gain access to courses, to improve the

quality of their social situations, and/or their parental skills and/or to enable them make a larger contribution to the community. Several referred to the frustrations associated with the difficulty they had in writing letters; difficulties in the workplace were referred to by some; while others said that reading difficulties had affected their social life.

A second study was that undertaken by Caswell (1993). She reported on two in-depth interviews undertaken six months apart with twenty participants in a South Auckland adult literacy scheme. Her focus was on identifying participants' perceptions of their gains on the programme. However, she also gathered a good deal of information on their backgrounds and reasons for participation. Thirteen of her participants were men and seven were women; ten were in their twenties, seven were in their thirties; and three were over 40; thirteen were pakeha, four were Maori, two were Samoan, and one was Tongan. Most were from poor or relatively poor backgrounds; several were from large families; and all reported experiences of failure at school and/or negative attitudes towards their initial schooling. The need for a better job was the reason given most commonly by participants for joining the scheme, and this was followed by the need to improve their education. With regard to perceived progress in reading, writing and spelling during their participation in the scheme, four of the participants saw no improvement in their literacy skills, while eleven saw a small and five a large improvement in their ability to read, write and spell. The biggest gain reported by participants from their participation in the scheme was not related directly to the technical aspects of reading and writing but rather in their self-confidence and ability to take greater control of their lives.

A third study was that undertaken by Benseman and Moore (2000). This research, which was focused on workplace literacy, had a very clear policy objective. Its purpose was to '... provide an indication as to what workplace literacy programmes can, and do, achieve ... The learners interviewed .. were chosen from Workbase programmes (and the intention was) to show a range of learner experiences in these programmes and more importantly, some insights as to what these experiences have meant for them and the changes that have occurred in their lives as a result' (p. 8). Nine people's stories are presented and the themes highlighted in the discussion draw attention to the following arguments:

- changes in the workplace, and in particular the increased use of technology, are increasing the demand for higher levels of literacy in many workplaces;
- the very different ways in which people had entered the programme and made new beginnings as literacy learners; and
- the impacts of the programme which ranged from improved levels of reading, writing, spelling and maths to greater self-confidence and assertiveness, increased oral skills, higher aspirations and a thirst for further learning (pp. 28-31).

This research has also been informed by the work of Tobias (1998) who drew on in-depth interviews

with a small sample of people with little or no formal post-compulsory education in order to examine their experiences and their views and perspectives on learning and education. His study supports the notion that people's participation in learning activities is influenced by a very wide range of social forces and that it cannot be understood without viewing it in a broad historical and social context. He thus draws attention to the impact on people's experiences and perspectives on learning and education of class, gender and race, along with many other factors including size of family, urban and rural backgrounds, experiences at home and at school as a youngster, formal and informal networks at home and with family, friends, work-mates and colleagues at home, in the neighbourhood, at the workplace and more generally in civil society. Moreover, his study also draws attention to some of the ways in which people with limited formal schooling and 'schoolwise knowledge' (Luttrell, 1989) are able to make important contributions to all aspects of social life.

### **Purpose of study**

The aim of this research was to investigate further which factors had (a) led the people concerned to stop their formal literacy learning at school, and (b) contributed to their renewed attempt to learn to read and write as adults. Underlying the study was the hope that it would contribute some insights and understandings which would be useful to adult literacy and basic education practitioners in Aotearoa New Zealand.

### **Methodology**

As indicated above, this study is qualitative rather than quantitative. It is intended to develop insights, which are necessarily relative, subjective and partial, while at the same time deepening our understanding of the experiences and perspectives of some of those engaged in adult literacy programmes. The study is built around case-studies which aim to develop depth of understanding. It seeks to identify themes and discourses arising out of the experiences and perspectives of participants in the study set within a wider social context. In these ways the approach of this study contrasts sharply with those which aim to test hypotheses or develop empirically verifiable generalisations or standardised measures of literacy.

The data for the study were drawn primarily from in-depth interviews with six people who volunteered to be interviewed from among the participants in literacy programmes offered by adult literacy centres and purchased by Skill New Zealand as part of its Training Opportunities Programme. Interviews were conducted very informally and conversationally by the participants' tutors who are also co-authors of this study. They had the ongoing confidence and trust of the interviewees over an extended period of time. The closeness of the relationships between interviewees and interviewers is both a strength and a limitation of this study.

Interviews varied in length between 45 minutes and an hour and a half. To maintain informality they were not tape-recorded. Each was, however, written up within three days of the interview. The information was then taken back to the interviewees who were given a copy of the script to review. In addition the interviewers read the script to them, and they were asked to check the accuracy of the record. During this discussion some additional information was obtained from the interviewees and was incorporated in the case studies.

The interviewers framed the interview questions using their own words. However the following are the general questions or areas of questioning which served as an overall guide to interviewing:

- how had the interviewees heard about the course?
- what had made them decide to apply?
- what had they thought the course would do for them?
- what had their previous experiences of learning been like?
- what, if any employment-related /recreation-related goals had they had?
- what, if any, support for learning had they received from friends, family, neighbours, etc.? and
- what were their computer skills.

In addition to the interviews a wide range of other opportunities were taken to gather the data necessary to develop the case-studies.

Permission was obtained from each of the interviewees to use the information, and they were encouraged to review all the information. Interviewees were informed that their anonymity would be respected. This has been achieved by modifying names and circumstances.

The interviews were conducted at the adult literacy centres providing the programmes. The writers feel that the themes which came out of the interviews have a number of implications for the way in which adult literacy programmes are delivered and the type of support services provided for adult learners.

### **Case-studies**

**Jim**, who identifies himself as Maori, was born in the early 1960s, and was in his late-30s at the time of the interview. He suffered sexual and mental abuse as a child and says, 'My parents didn't even know it was happening'. He adds, 'I don't think that parents realise that even comments like 'Come on, you're bloody useless' on the rugby field have a big effect'. At primary school he was in a special class and found even then that he couldn't communicate with teachers. He spent a good deal of time climbing trees because he loves nature and feels safe there. 'Nature doesn't hurt you', he says.

He says that, with the exception of one sister and himself, none of his family had any problems with reading and writing. He says that he found school very boring. Of his teachers he says, 'I disliked the way they taught. I couldn't communicate with them. I tried to tell them what I wanted to do but they weren't interested'. Bookwork was always difficult for Jim. However he found science subjects interesting, and he enjoyed a number of sports. On the other hand, he says that he missed a lot of schooling. 'I played a lot of hooky', he says.

Jim says that he has 'learned a lot from life'; however he has learned most from his partner and from 'a pommie black fellow on a deep sea trawler who gave him an insight into what the world was like'. Jim considers that only recently has it become possible for him to really learn. 'My partner taught me how to communicate and be more confident.' He says that he made the decision to begin learning to read and write again because his children are growing up and he 'wants to be able to understand what they are talking about'. His daughter used to look at him and say he was dumb when he was trying to help. He also felt he was stuck in the same crowd of people and this prevented him from 'venturing out'. Jim considers that counselling is a very important part of learning; 'I had managed through counselling to off-load...I had found a whole new strange and interesting world'.

At both Workbridge and the Department of Work and Income he was offered the opportunity to get some new skills and a place on a literacy programme. 'I was getting older and wiser', he says. Moreover, he points out that he had 'mainly been involved in labouring work and heavy lifting.' Through the literacy programme Jim says that he hopes to 'get a better insight into life', to change from labouring work to an 'easier way of making a living', and to gain increased self-esteem and confidence. He would eventually like to be able to read complicated veterinary books.

Jim thinks everyone should have access to books and reading. 'I love words and the way people put words – they are amazing!' Ideally, Jim would like a job working with animals, particularly horses. He has done voluntary work at a local animal park. He has also become very interested in computers and really enjoys using the computer as a learning tool. It is important to Jim that his confidence and self-esteem are increased and that by the end of the course I will 'know that I'm capable of much more'.

**Sarah**, a Pakeha/European New Zealander, was born in the early 1960s, and was in her late-30s at the time of the interview. She is the second youngest of five children. 'I can't remember much about being a little girl,' she says. From about the age of five she was sexually abused by an older brother. From an early age she felt inadequate. She says, 'I was always teased by my brothers about being dumb. I grew up thinking I was a retarded person. It took a long time for me to realise that I wasn't. I don't think my

mum wanted me to succeed. She would send me to the shop and by the time I got there I had forgotten what I had to get.’ She had a really hard time when she went home.

She says, ‘Girls in our family were like slaves and the boys never had to do anything. I felt I didn’t want to be a girl, it would be easier to be a male.’ She struggled with her reading and for a number of years her father tried to help her. However, she found this difficult. ‘Dad had a chart of words and every time I got them right he would give me five cents’. This continued until Sarah became pregnant when she was 13 years old.

Reflecting back on her school-days, Sarah says, ‘No one at school could be bothered with me. I was there, but in my own space. I didn’t get the encouragement I needed to stay. I was shoved into one of the lowest classes. I went to a few schools. I was a real shy person.’ Sarah got through school by ‘mingling in the background’. She believes that today teachers would have picked up on what was happening or not happening for her. Sarah found everything at school difficult. ‘My mind was always in other places. I think I would have enjoyed it if I’d been able to keep up.’

She felt that her mother never wanted her and her sister, who is an ex-drug addict, to succeed. When she first became pregnant she says, ‘I was so naïve’. She couldn’t tell her parents, and when she did tell them, her mother ‘... didn’t want to know’. Her mother had always threatened Sarah that if she became pregnant ‘she would dress me in a sack, which she did’. She was removed from school and taken by her mother to another town. Years later she found out that her friends thought she had died. ‘I was there, and then I was gone.’ She also discovered much later that her father, whom she considers a wonderful man, knew nothing about what was happening.

As a teenager, Sarah was ‘shoved into sheltered workshops’ and it has taken her a long time to realise that she isn’t retarded. After she married she was too afraid to go anywhere. ‘It was only willpower and faith in myself that pulled me through.’ Sarah has a very negative image of herself, and she sees her marriage as an escape route out of home. She had a son when she was twenty-one and a daughter two years later. She has since had a third child. ‘My life was OK but it was not a fulfilled relationship.’ She says that her husband was kind and good and tried to help her by arranging for her to see psychiatrists and other professional people. They parted after seven years. She says, ‘He was better off not having to put up with living with a bitch.’ She remains a single parent.

Sarah had been trying to develop her reading and spelling skills for a very long time. When she was about 15, she had received help from a volunteer tutor who she thought was really nice. She came to the literacy programme in which she was enrolled at the time of the interview as a result of a suggestion from a relative who works as a teacher aide. Sarah frequently describes the literacy



programme as 'my last chance to get the skills I need'. 'I have got to get out into the workplace and when I am an old lady I want to read, not sit and stare. I want to keep myself entertained'. She says, 'The people here are very good; they tell me to keep trying and I will get what I want.' Sarah has a real desire to teach herself, she doesn't want to be told what to do. 'I want to be able to do it without help. I want to be able to write stories and poems and read a 'proper chapter book'. 'I need to find the right thing to learn from. I think the sounds are the key to everything.' Sarah believes that she has learned most from her own family. 'The tutors have been really good but my children have really helped me'.

Eventually Sarah hopes to get a job, but she would never work in a factory. She would like to be a tiler. She worked in paid employment briefly many, many years ago but most of her time has been spent bringing up her children. 'If things had gone right for me' she says, 'I would like to have become a doctor, but I will do something to help other people.' However, Sarah is deeply committed to her three children and wishes she could have sat down and taught them the alphabet before they went to school. 'I wish they had been able to spell their names and recognise their address. I would like them to have had this knowledge so they wouldn't get complexes, so they could keep up. I would like to have been able to give them enough experiences to make up their own minds. My kids have gone the right way. They were school age before I left them with anybody. It was just them and me, no grandparents, against the big, wide world. Now people come up to me and say, 'you made a bloody good job of bringing up these kids.' Sarah's oldest child is now 'a working man'".

**Dan** was born in England in the 1950s, and was in his 40s at the time of the interview. When he was still a youngster his parents moved, with their family, first to Australia and then two years later to New Zealand in search of work.

Dan's early schooling was in England. However, from an early age he struggled with reading and writing. This, he believes, was brought about by the illness he experienced as a child, and his consequent regular absences from school. So frequent were these absences, he says, that he 'could count the days he went to school'. He liked school, however, and was good at French. He recalls, 'Our teacher used to let us play housie and paid us when we won. He called the numbers out in French.' Dan also enjoyed woodwork and practical things at school. Sport, however, presented difficulties because of his ill-health, and reading also was difficult: 'at times I would look at the book and just sit there'. He also says that his father tried to help him as far as he could.

When the family moved to Australia, he was put in a special class. He describes some aspects of this experience. 'The classroom had boards with writing on them with different colours for different letters – it was an experiment in South Australia. There were twenty posters. We had to learn the sentences

from each poster – read them and write them. The teacher would dictate the sentences. You had to complete each poster one hundred percent before you moved on to the next one. There were 25 of us in the class. I was there for two years. Some students completed all twenty. I got up to number ten. We moved to New Zealand, so I couldn't finish. I missed out again'.

Over the years, Dan has worked in a variety of paid jobs and has also done voluntary work. He likes working in stores and has his forklift certificate. However, when he joined the literacy programme that he was on at the time of the interview, he was unemployed and was finding that his limited reading and writing skills were affecting his ability to get a job. He says, 'I had a lot of trouble filling out forms. I can read enough to get me by, but that's it. I can't get a job because I can't write and I can't spell.'

He found out about the learning programme from the Department of Work and Income and an educational organisation. He enjoys the opportunity to develop new skills, and the literacy programme was living up to Dan's expectations. He thinks it is great learning in a small group where people help each other. He really enjoys going out of his way to help people. He feels the tutor makes learning really interesting. 'She pushes us, sort of....'.

Dan takes work home and his girlfriend helps him. He sees his ability to write as improving steadily. He is writing more letters than he has ever done in the past. He says that he wrote to his father who lives overseas, and he said that 'it was the first time he had been able to understand it without reading it two or three times'. He says that he is also reading for pleasure very much more. 'I like good action things, like ships and war stories'.

Dan used a computer for the first time on the literacy programme, and enjoyed learning the basics. He now says that he would like to know more, and is considering doing a full-time computer course. In addition to developing his literacy and numeracy skills, he is working towards a National Certificate in Employment Skills. However, if a job comes up he says that he would now know how to apply for it. 'I have a much better idea now of how to word a letter'.

**Christie**, a Pakeha/European New Zealander, was born in the late-1960s, and was in her early-30s at the time of the interview. She is the youngest of five children. Her parents struggled financially when she was young. Christie said that her mother and father were very supportive of her. However, she also says that her mother and other family members found reading and writing difficult. She said that her brothers and sisters were complete 'horrors' at school and 'when I got there (I was fifth in line) the teachers said "not another one!"' She felt intimidated by this, especially at high school, and it was made worse by the fact that her sister was good at athletics and she wasn't. Christie enjoyed practical

subjects such as woodwork and metalwork at school, but said that ‘the most difficult times were when the teacher would just talk and what she said would have to be written down’.

Since leaving school Christie has had a variety of paid jobs. She is a mother of two children, a boy and a girl, both of whom are at school. She has also done various forms of voluntary work and her abilities in various practical activities have enabled her to use her spare time on creative projects. For these kinds of activities she says that high levels of reading and writing are unnecessary. At the time she joined the literacy programme she was unemployed and looking for a job. She found out about the literacy programme from the Department of Work and Income. Her children, a daughter and son, were getting older and seemed to need more from her in terms of assistance with their homework.

Returning to study was something a friend in another town was doing and she thought, “If he can do it so can I!” ‘I wanted school certificate Maths and English, and I expected to get basic reading and spelling skills while at the literacy programme’. The atmosphere and the tutors enabled her to address some of the things she had missed out on since she was at school 17 years previously.

At the time of the interview, Christie had completed School Certificate maths to qualify her for entry into the sixth form. She was also continuing to work on her Maths and English and was achieving reasonable results. As a consequence of her participation in the literacy programme she says that she had been able to help family members including her children with their reading and writing, and this help included working with the family computer, which she thinks, is an excellent learning tool. Shortly after the interview she left the literacy programme in order to look for employment.

**Rose**, a Pakeha/European New Zealander, was born in the early-1950s, and was in her late-40s at the time of the interview. Rose was the fourth eldest of a family of twelve children. From birth, she had been a sick child who was in and out of hospital for the first six years of her life. She has good memories of her mother’s care for her. For example, she recalls that when she was nearly five, her mum took her to school with her brothers and sisters and she was allowed to start a few weeks before her birthday. She felt very grown up, being like her two older brothers and sister, and remembers having her little bottle of milk. At lunch-time she sat down with the others to eat her lunch, and then walked home to ask her mum what to do with the brown paper lunch bag. She said, ‘Mum just laughed and took me the four miles back to school. As a consequence of her illnesses, however, she found school difficult. Moreover her father was constantly on the move from town to town, which she says, made it very hard to keep up with the rest of the class. In spite of this, there were things that she liked at school. At high school Rose enjoyed science and home economics, but did not do well in maths, spelling, reading or writing.

Rose had been abused by her father from an early age. She recalls an incident from her childhood. It took place just before Christmas one year. When she was 9 years old she almost drowned at the beach and her father jumped in to save her but had to be saved himself. 'Well, that was it!' she says, 'When we got home I got the belting of my life. He lined us all up outside and put all the Christmas gifts on the fire and said it was my fault that nobody was going to have Christmas. Dad always told me that I was useless and no good at anything'. Rose told many stories of the beatings that she endured. For two years she stayed with her 'Nana, who was kind and loving'. She believes that she did really well at school over that time. Her Dad came and took her home again and the beatings started all over again. 'The only place I could escape to was school', she says. 'I was only in High School for one and a half years when my dad took me out of school as he was scared I was pregnant after he had raped me when I was fifteen years old'.

Rose ran away from home and got a job in a bakery, but her father once again found her and came to take money from her on payday. When she was 17 years old she married for the first time, and soon had her first child. She thought that she was 'safe' and that she didn't have to do any reading and writing; she could just sign her name. She then had a second child. However when her husband left her she had to give this child up for adoption. She says that she then 'became a drunk' and remained that way for three years. The father of her third child helped Rose 'clean herself up'. After witnessing a friend get badly burnt while drinking Rose stopped drinking and hasn't drunk for twenty-five years.

Much of her adult life from that time on has been devoted to bringing up her seven children. Now that most of her children have left home she finds that she has 'time on her hands'. As a consequence she went on a course, which she found 'built her ability to follow her dreams'. One of Rose's 'dreams was to go back to school and finish her education', which she felt 'had been stolen from her'. She found out about the literacy programme from the adult literacy centre itself. She went in for an interview and walked out happy to know that she was to start soon. She went 'back to school' after 30 years a happy person and has now made considerable progress in both literacy and numeracy. Her employment aim was to be able to work for Social Services, and in particular she hopes to work with young people and their families.

**Bob**, a Pakeha/European New Zealander, was born in the mid-1960s, and was 36 years-old at the time of the interview. Bob was the eighth of ten children. At primary school he was in a special class. Bob believes that he didn't succeed at school partly because 'they had too many outings' and partly because 'the teachers weren't made for teaching'. The school authorities wanted to place him at a Residential School but his mother would not allow this. He had a 'hard time' at school as people thought he was 'dumb' because he couldn't read. As a pre-schooler, Bob had put a box of cigarette papers into his mouth and set it alight. This resulted in damage to the roof of his mouth and his voice

box. Consequently, he was left with a severe speech impediment and didn't like much about school and certainly disliked the way some of the teachers spoke to him, especially when he was brave enough to ask a question. However, Bob did have one positive experience of teachers. He recalls that when he was six years old he stayed with a particularly nice teacher whilst his mother was in hospital. He tried to locate her recently.

Bob left school without any qualifications, and over the past sixteen years he has had a variety of labouring jobs. Bob first attended a literacy programme in 1996 after he had been dismissed once again from a job because of his inability to read and write effectively. His caseworker at Workbridge told him about the literacy programme he was attending at the time of the interview. Bob realized that he now needed a good education and not just a 'strong back' to get a job. He says that 'I needed to learn how to read to get a proper job'. After almost a year Bob was able to start work again but unfortunately, one day when he returned home from work he suffered a heart attack. So, once again, he needed to return to study to further develop his skills.

This time he wanted to be able to read the newspaper, complete dockets in the work situation and write a personal letter without assistance. Bob definitely thinks that he has learnt the most about literacy and about social skills at the adult literacy centre he was attending at that time. He considers that he himself, his tutor, and everyone in the class have helped him learn. Bob is proud of the unit standards that he has gained. Bob had tried having individual lessons with a volunteer, but gave up, as he didn't get on well with his tutor. He was very keen to get another job, probably in a factory, as he was sick of working outside and cannot do heavy lifting any more. Bob said the he would like to continue the counselling sessions he had started and continue learning with his present tutor.

## **Discussion**

The stories told by our interviewees are in one sense not surprising. They accord closely with the findings presented in the research discussed earlier in this paper. In another sense each story is full of surprises as the uniqueness of each person is unfolded. The stories point to the diversity of literacy learners and cast doubt once again on the validity of attempting to develop generalisations about people with formal literacy difficulties. As was the case in several of the studies referred to above, the backgrounds and learning experiences of our interviewees are diverse and their motivations to learn complex and dynamic. There are, however, several themes which emerged from the interviews, and for the purpose of this discussion we have identified a number of themes which seemed important to us as we reflected on the interview data and the experiences of our interviewees. As indicated above, we were particularly interested in those themes which might help us to understand what had led them to stop their formal learning when they were young and what had led them to their renewed attempt at formal literacy learning as adults.

*Family experiences:* Several interviewees talked about their experiences in difficult family situations and the ways in which these had affected them. Some from large families felt that individual family-members had not received the attention that children from smaller families might have had. On the other hand, positive features of being a member of a large family were also identified. Frequent moves by some families (occasioned among other things by the search for a job) which led to changes of school or to early withdrawal from school, were seen by some to have contributed to difficulties experienced at school. On the other hand, for others this was seen to have contributed to their independence and hence to their resilience

Some interviewees were affected by *abuse within the family*. Jim suffered sexual and mental abuse as a child. He says, 'My parents didn't even know it was happening'. He adds, 'I don't think that parents realise that even comments like 'Come on, you're bloody useless' on the rugby field have a big effect'. Sarah was sexually abused by an older brother from about the age of five. She says, 'I was always teased by my brothers about being dumb... I grew up thinking I was a retarded person. It took a long time for me to realise that I wasn't. I don't think my mum wanted me to succeed'. When she was 13 years old Sarah became pregnant. She says that her mother had always threatened her that if she became pregnant 'she would dress me in a sack, which she did'. She was taken by her mother to another town, and she says that it was only years later she found out that her friends thought she had died. Rose also recalls a long history of abuse, with regular beatings by her father throughout her childhood. When she was fifteen years old this came to a head when he raped her, and then withdrew her from school because he was scared that she was pregnant.

Several interviewees, on the other hand, talked about *support from family members when they were children* or teenagers. Christie says that although her parents struggled financially when she was young they were very supportive of her. However her mother also found reading and writing difficult. Dan says that his father 'tried to help him as far as he could', and Sarah says that her father, whom she considers a wonderful man, also tried to help her with her difficulties at school. She says that, 'Dad had a chart of words and every time I got them right he would give me five cents'. By way of contrast, as we have seen, Rose's father abused her while it was her mother who cared for and tried to encourage her. Rose also refers to the two years that she spent with her grandmother who was kind and loving. She believes that she did really well at school over that time. For some of the interviewees this support has been crucial.

*Illness, accidents and other traumatic events* also played an important part in the lives of some of the interviewees. Dan attributes his struggle with reading and writing from a very early age to his frequent absences from school caused by illness. So frequent were these absences, he says, that he 'could count

the days he went to school'. Rose too was a sick child who was in and out of hospital for the first six years of her life. She also attributes some of her literacy difficulties to her chronic illness as a child. Bob's serious childhood accident, which left him with a severe speech impediment, had a big effect on his schooling and his self-confidence as a learner. In particular it affected the way in which some teachers spoke to him, especially 'when he was brave enough to ask a question'. Ill-health, in the form of a recent heart attack, has also had the effect of making him realise that he needed to return to study to further develop his skills.

*Experiences of initial schooling: negative experiences at school* were seen as having a major impact on people's formal literacy learning. Jim says that he found school boring and from an early age found things difficult. In particular, he couldn't communicate with his teachers. Being moved to a special class at primary school didn't help. He says that he spent a good deal of time during his early school years climbing trees because he loves nature and feels safe there. 'Nature doesn't hurt you', he says and adds, 'I played a lot of hooky'. Being a really shy person, Sarah says that, 'No one at school could be bothered with me. I was there, but in my own space. I didn't get the encouragement I needed to stay. I was shoved into one of the lowest classes'. Sarah got through school by 'mingling in the background'. She found everything at school difficult. 'My mind was always in other places. I think I would have enjoyed it if I'd been able to keep up'. Bob had a 'hard time' at school as people thought he was 'dumb' because he couldn't read. At primary school he was in a special class. Bob believes that he didn't succeed at school partly because 'they had too many outings' and partly because 'the teachers weren't made for teaching'. As has been noted above he feels that his speech impediment had a major impact on his schooling and on his relationships with teachers.

Several of the interviewees, including those who were academically capable at school, preferred 'practical' to 'academic' subjects. 'Schoolwise knowledge' (Luttrell, 1989) was seen by them as either irrelevant or 'difficult'. Christie for example enjoyed such practical subjects as woodwork and metalwork at school, but said that 'the most difficult times were when the teacher would just talk and what she said would have to be written down'. These perceptions led to boredom with school and a consequent lack of attention, which in turn resulted in 'lost time' and strong feelings about their negative experience of school. Other interviewees such as Dan liked school initially but suffered from a succession of moves from different schools and different educational systems.

Despite these negative experiences and perceptions of school, several interviewees also pointed to *positive experiences of their initial schooling*. Some referred to particular subjects or activities which interviewees enjoyed, while others referred to individual teachers who had made a mark on them. As we saw earlier, Jim's experience of school was largely negative. In spite of this, he found science subjects interesting and enjoyed a number of sports. Dan liked school, and was good at French. Dan

enjoyed woodwork and practical things at school. Christie's experience of school was largely negative, but she too enjoyed practical subjects such as woodwork and metalwork. Rose's experience of school was mixed. In spite of many difficulties, she says that there were things that she liked at school. She says that she enjoyed science and home economics at high school, but did not do well in maths, spelling, reading or writing. Bob's positive experience was with one teacher. He recalls that when he was six years old he stayed with a particularly nice teacher whilst his mother was in hospital. So impressed was he with her that he had recently, thirty years or so later, tried unsuccessfully to locate her. One may speculate that without these positive experiences and perceptions it is unlikely that some interviewees would ever have returned as adults to formal literacy learning. Though they might well have continued to engage in other literacy practices, 'schoolwise' literacies might well have been rejected as irrelevant to their lives and aspirations (See for example Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Prinsloo, Breier & Street, 1996; Prinsloo & Kell, 1997).

*Experiences at school and at home affected one another.* This is most obviously the case among those who were abused at home as well as among those who moved to a number of schools in different towns or countries when they were children. However there were other specific effects. Sarah was teased and labelled as 'dumb' by her brothers at home. As a result she felt 'dumb' at school and she 'grew up thinking she was a retarded person' - a perception no doubt reinforced by her experience of being 'shoved into sheltered workshops' as a teenager. Being labelled by teachers as another 'horror' when she started school following a number of older siblings, and feeling intimidated by a sister who was successful at athletics were factors which Christie saw as affecting her perception of her own ability to learn. On the other hand, as we have seen, certain kinds of positive home experiences were also seen by some as supporting school-based learning.

*Experiences of class and gender and their impact on formal literacy learning:* Most interviewees did not refer explicitly to their working class backgrounds or to gender and the impact these might have had on their learning as children, young people and as adults, and we cannot assume that limited levels of formal or school-based literacy can be linked with people's working class backgrounds or to their experiences as women and men. Many people from middle class backgrounds also struggle with formal literacy, and many people from working class backgrounds achieve high levels of school-based literacy. Nevertheless, class and gender, along with other social forces, can and do play an important role in shaping literacy practices, and more men than women seem to have difficulties with formal literacy practices. On the other hand Sarah highlights a different issue, a clear case of gender discrimination which she feels affected her formal literacy learning. 'Girls in our family were like slaves', she says, 'The boys never had to do anything. I felt I didn't want to be a girl, it would be easier to be a male'.



All interviewees in this study were from working class backgrounds. There is evidence in several interviewees' stories of the kind of disjuncture and fragmentation between the social worlds of home and school which has also been described in other studies of the schooling of young people from working class backgrounds (See for example Hughes & Lauder, 1991; Luttrell, 1989; Tobias, 1998). Moreover the lives and work-patterns of interviewees have followed the kinds of trajectories common within those sections of the working class which are marginalised in the labour market and are either unemployed or in the kinds of jobs with little security, low wages and weak (if any) union representation.

*The impact of social network of current family and friends:* Several interviewees talked of the help, support and encouragement they had received in recent times from family (their own children and/or partner), as well as from friends when they returned as adults to undertake formal literacy learning. They saw this as crucial. Jim considers that only recently has it become possible for him to 'really learn'. 'My partner taught me how to communicate and be more confident.' He says he made the decision to begin learning to read and write again because his children are growing up and he 'wants to be able to understand what they are talking about'. Sarah believes that she has learned most from her own family. 'The tutors have been really good but my children have really helped me'. Dan takes work home and his girlfriend helps him. He sees his ability to write as improving steadily. He is writing more letters than he has ever done in the past. He says that he wrote to his father who lives overseas, and he said that 'it was the first time he had been able to understand it without reading it two or three times'. For Christie on the other hand the needs of her young family provide a central focus. She sees herself as using her newfound skills to help members of her family.

*The support of tutor and class group:* The role of the tutor in providing support and encouragement as well as in undertaking all the other activities of teaching is seen by several interviewees as very important. In addition, the help and support provided by members of the class group are valued. Where the kinds of external supportive networks referred to above are weak or non-existent, the role of the tutor and class group may well be crucial. Several interviewees referred to the help provided by friends and classmates within the supportive learning environment. They saw this as such a positive feature of their return to learning. Dan thinks it is great learning in a small group where people help each other. He really enjoys going out of his way to help people. He feels the tutor makes learning really interesting. 'She pushes us, sort of....' Christie says that the atmosphere and the tutors had enabled her to address some of the things she had missed out on since she was at school 17 years previously. Bob says that he has learnt the most about literacy as well as social skills at the adult literacy centre he was attending at that time. He considers that he himself, his tutor, and everyone in the class have helped him learn.

Interviewees commented very favourably on their *experiences of the literacy learning programmes* which they were undertaking. Several referred positively to increases in self-confidence and self-esteem as well as in literacy and numeracy skills. Jim, Christie and Dan have also been able to gain computer skills and feel that computers are an important learning tool. As a result of their 'second chance' formal learning experiences several participants said they had become more aware of their capabilities and that they want to use them for further personal development as well as to help others. Sarah, for example, wants to be able to teach herself in the future. In this way, some participants saw themselves as not only developing practical and creative skills, and greater resilience and willpower, but also gaining new insights about themselves.

The role of *government agencies* is important. Interviewees saw the Department of Work and Income and Workbridge as enabling them to obtain information on the literacy programmes. In addition some interviewees made use of other social services. While it is unclear whether Sarah's experience of psychiatrists and 'other professional people' was helpful, she did appreciate her husband's helpful intentions in assisting her to access these services. Other interviewees valued counselling services. Jim sees counselling as 'a very important part of learning'.

Although experiences of initial schooling were mixed several interviewees, *informal post-school learning* experiences at voluntary organisations were viewed more favourably. This finding accords with findings of previous studies, which have highlighted the contradictory nature of formal schooling (See discussion in Tobias, 1998 pp. 134-5). Although most of those involved in schools are fully committed to learning and teaching, it may be argued that initial formal schooling serves most effectively the interests of those from middle class backgrounds. By way of contrast with many forms of informal and nonformal adult education and in particular the kinds of formal literacy programmes referred to in this paper, initial schooling serves to reproduce and legitimate predominant social and cultural patterns in society as well as producing and legitimating the hierarchy of skills and attitudes required in the labour market.

In the light of all this, why did people return to formal literacy learning? As has been mentioned above, people's *motivations to learn* are highly complex and dynamic. Nevertheless it is possible to identify some themes or reasons why interviewees returned to literacy learning. Whilst the need for employment and the presence of the 'work ethic' was a significant factor and participants had been referred by agencies like the Department of Work and Income and Workbridge, the importance of wanting to be a good parent and of helping their children as a motivating factor occurred several times. As we have already pointed out, it is also clear that *support* from family members (or some significant other such as a partner, close friend or another student) was a key factor in determining whether participants continued on the programme.

Some people, it seems, only return to formal literacy learning in their late-20s, 30s or 40s because they need to put some distance between negative school and other learning experiences as a child or young person and coming back to formal learning as an adult, while for others this return may coincide with their children needing help with homework. Another motivation was *wanting* to learn by finding a particular aim for study - the wish to help others (see above), to understand themselves, to increase self-confidence or self-esteem, or a more specific goal such as Jim's wish to work with animals (which means he is focusing on being able to read veterinary books) or wishing to gain a particular qualification (Christie wanting to work towards School Certificate English and Maths).

Why do some who return gain a 'thirst for learning', while others do not? Why have some managed to work and successfully raise their own families whilst others have not? Maybe the 'x' factor is resilience, which allows them to be survivors (rather than victims) who have developed successful strategies for overcoming their lack of formal literacy skills and negative experiences of their 'stolen childhood'. As Sarah put it, 'It was only willpower and faith in myself that pulled me through'. Not only this, but although most have had difficult childhood experiences they have been able to be successful parents - Sarah, for example, said that 'Now people come up to me and say, "you made a bloody good job of bringing up these kids"'. Resilience and determination have also enabled most of those interviewed to continue with their literacy programme - only Christie had left the programme shortly after the interview, and this was in order to look for employment.

## **Conclusion**

The findings of the study highlight the fact that formal literacy learning cannot be understood without locating it in a wider context. The study identifies a number of contextual factors which had a powerful influence on the literacy learning of the people interviewed here. Thus for example those whose families struggled with poverty and unemployment when they were children, those whose families were forced to move constantly and who therefore themselves experienced frequent moves from one primary school to the next and those who had experienced health problems and other traumatic events were likely to see these factors as contributing to their reading, writing and computational difficulties. It may be argued that practitioners on their own can do little about many of these things. Many of them can only be addressed collaboratively within the context of wider social and political movements.

On the other hand evidence from this study also reinforces the findings of a number of other studies which suggest some factors closely associated with effective adult literacy learning environments and approaches to literacy teaching which can be addressed directly by practitioners. Thus for example the findings may be interpreted as emphasising the importance of adult literacy practitioners maintaining

informal and friendly relationships with learners, engaging with participants as equals whilst recognising relations of power where these exist, and seeing themselves as ‘hosts’ rather than as ‘instructors’ in the literacy learning situation. At the same time evidence suggests that participants do ‘expect to be taught’ by practitioners and do expect the highest degree of professionalism from their tutors.

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